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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN OFFICIALS TELL STAFFDEL ANAND THEY
ARE FOCUSED ON THE FUTURE

Classified By: Charge Richard E. Hoagland for reasons 1.4
(B) and (D).

11. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

12. (SBU) SUMMARY: The U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs (HCFA) staff delegation visiting Turkmenistan August 24-25 came eager to see evidence of positive changes in the right direction. All of their interlocutors indicated an interest and willingness to continue engagement with the United States and other international actors and to learn from foreign experience. The U.S. delegation faced reluctance on the part of some officials to share information at times, but also heard the message that Turkmenistan is a young country, still in the process of the formation and development of its political system. The U.S. government could make additional gains by bringing Turkmenistani officials to the United States on exchanges. END SUMMARY.

FULL SCHEDULE FOR DELEGATION MEMBERS

13. (SBU) The U.S. House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee (HFAC) staff delegation -- Manpreet Singh Anand, Amanda Sloat, Eugene Gurevich, and Melissa Adamson -- visited Turkmenistan August 24-25. The delegation was granted all meetings they requested, including with Deputy Chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers/Foreign Minister Rashit Meredov, Minister of Oil and Gas Baymyrat Hojamammedov, Minister of Economy and Finance Jojamyrat Geldimyradov, Minister of Agriculture Esenmyrat Orazgeldiyev, Minister of Healthcare and Medical Industry Ata Serdarov, Chairman of the Mejlis Committee on Protection of Human Rights and Freedoms Juma Jumaev, member of the Mejlis Committee on Social and Economic Policy Bashim Annagurbanov, and Chairman of the Mejlis Committee on International and Interparliamentary Affairs Akmuhammet Shamuhammedov. They also met with members of the State's Supreme Council on Science and Technology and held a roundtable with editors of major newspapers and producers of television news stations.

SIGNS OF PROGRESSIVE THINKING

14. (SBU) Officials who met with the Staffdel openly discussed some, but not all, impediments to economic growth, and the positive nature of the U.S.-Turkmenistan relationship. They also highlighted areas of interest to the United States such as revitalization of pension payments, education, and openness to investment in the oil sector. They heard indications of new openness and change that were unthinkable a year ago. The head of Miras television channel stated the focus of historical programming is to learn from the past, and not to live in the past. At many if not all of the meetings, Turkmenistan government officials expressed clear interest in working with foreign companies, foreign governments, and learning from others' experiences.

BUT SOME OLD WAYS DIE HARD

15. (SBU) However, the delegation also received a solid dose of Turkmen thinking. At the Ministry of Economy and Finance, the Minister extolled the virtues of free natural gas and salt as benefits to citizens of Turkmenistan. At the Ministry of Agriculture, officials expressed reluctance to privatize land, because land is a national symbol.

16. (SBU) The delegation also noticed a tendency to ignore problems in several meetings. The Minister of Health insisted that there were no AIDS or HIV-infected patients in Turkmenistan. Responding to a question about the preponderance of satellite dishes on apartment buildings all over Ashgabat, the head of TV4 claimed that 90-100% of viewers watch Turkmenistani rather than Russian satellite news. Various members of the media stated that programming was based on viewer interest, and much of the programming was patriotic because Turkmen are patriotic.

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WE ARE YOUNG, BUT WE WANT TO LEARN FROM THE UNITED STATES AND OTHERS

17. (SBU) All of the officials indicated an interest and willingness to continue engagement with the United States and other international actors. The Minister of Health discussed USAID projects for eliminating tuberculosis. At the Ministry of Agriculture, officials cited USAID programs and exchange programs such as Fulbright, the Department of Commerce's SABIT exchanges, and Department of Agriculture's Cochran exchanges. More than once, Turkmenistani officials stated that, at 15 years of age, their country was young, and they were eager to learn from U.S. experience. The officials also said that they needed more time to develop. At the Mejlis, the delegation found Turkmenistan parliamentarians especially interested in Congressional oversight of the executive branch in the United States.

18. (SBU) The Minister of Oil and Gas said that they are still considering the Trans-Caspian pipeline option, and did not close the door on legal changes in the sector. He also stated several times that the government makes decisions based on economic factors, not political ones, and added that a pipeline to Europe may be profitable. The Minister of Economy and Finance said Turkmenistan is in a period of reform in which they are increasing their economic capacity and cooperation with other countries. He added that President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov's reforms which are aimed chiefly at the prosperity of people and society.

19. (SBU) COMMENT: Turkmenistani officials are eager to engage with international actors, but as evidenced by an occasional tendency to gloss over or misrepresent aspects of Turkmenistan's state, old habits die hard. That said, delegations are valuable tools to engage Turkmenistan officials. The U.S. government could make additional gains if more Turkmenistani officials traveled to the United States

on various exchange programs. END COMMENT.
HOAGLAND